

FORT MYER HEIGHTS SCHOOL
(Woodrow Wilson Elementary School)
1601 Wilson Boulevard
Arlington
Virginia

HABS VA-1445
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

FORT MYER HEIGHTS SCHOOL

(Woodrow Wilson Elementary School)

HABS No. VA-1445

Location: 1601 Wilson Boulevard, Arlington, Arlington County, Virginia.

The Coordinates for the Wilson School are 77.077625W, 38.895039 N. The coordinates were obtained from Google Earth in 2010, and it is presumed, using NAD 1983. There is no restriction on the release of the locational data to the public.

Present Owner: Arlington County School Board.

Present Use: The Mongolian School of Washington, DC, has used the building since 2007, although the building is also a swing space for Arlington's Public Schools.

Significance: The Fort Myer Heights School was completed in 1910, and after the Hume School (HABS No. VA-1435), is the oldest extant school building in the county. The Richmond-based architect, Charles Morrison Robinson, designed the school. Robinson went on to provide plans for four other school buildings in the county as well as for several college campuses in Virginia. Due to the county's burgeoning population during the inter-war years, the Washington, DC, firm Upman and Adams, Architects, was contracted for the expansion of the building in 1925. The school was renamed the Woodrow Wilson Elementary School at that time.

Robinson draped his institutional building in the neoclassicism favored during the Colonial Revival era of architectural design. The Wilson School, as it is colloquially known today, had a formal front entrance portico and ornate rooftop cupola. Although neither feature survives, at the time of construction these elements made the school an imposing presence on an otherwise open, not yet urban, landscape.

Project Information: This short form HABS report was adapted from a larger study of the site completed by Cynthia Liccese-Torres in 2008-2009, and was done in order to provide some information about the architects of record and a general description of the historic building to accompany survey photography completed in December 2010 by James W. Rosenthal, HABS Photographer.

Architectural Information

A. Description

The original Fort Myer Heights School consisted of a two-story main block that was T-shaped in plan. Inside there were six rooms on two floors, plus a basement.¹ The foundation was made of concrete and the walls above the concrete water table were faced with bricks laid in Flemish bond. The exterior of the building was notable for the portico with Corinthian columns that marked the front entrance. The gabled pediment had a wide frieze and was further accentuated by scrolled modillions at the cornice.² The entrance doors were paired beneath an elliptical fanlight. Above this entrance was a triple window with double-hung sash glazed with six-over-one lights. The portico was removed in July 1963.³

Since its completion in 1910, there have been two substantial additions made to the original building. The first dates to 1925 and consisted of a two-story (raised basement and first floor), flat-roofed wing along the length of the north (rear) elevation.⁴ It was designed using the same materials as the original building, with a concrete basement level and water table and brick first level. The second addition was completed in 1957 as part of a significant remodeling campaign that raised the roofline of the 1925 addition, expanded the building out toward Wilson Boulevard and relocated the entrance, and replaced the windows.⁵

Inside, original wood trim and the pressed tin ceiling remain, as do the storage closets, but most of the interior fabric dates to the 1957 remodeling.

¹ School Board Minutes, October 26, 1907, in Ledger of Alexandria County, VA School Board Minutes, 1905-10, 93. Copy of the ledger on file in the Virginia Room, Arlington County Public Library.

² Originally there was a hexagonal wood cupola centered above the pedimented main portico. The cupola featured rounded and open arch openings and a domed cap with a decorative finial. A photograph from ca. 1958 shows that the upper tiers of the cupola had been removed, with only the raised base and balustrade remaining. Lois Snyderman and the Coulture/Denig Partnership, "Historic Resources Survey: 18 Early-Mid Twentieth-Century School Buildings in Arlington County, Virginia," Chapter 20 (Wilson School), prepared 1991, and includes a photocopy of a photograph from around 1958. The caption states the image was from the files of the Teaching Materials Center, Arlington County Public Schools.

³ Arlington County historic building permit record for 1601 Wilson Boulevard (alteration permit #23179, approved July 26, 1963), on file Neighborhood Services Division, Department of Community Planning, Housing, and Development.

⁴ Snyderman, 436. See also May 1957 microfiche of construction plans (sheet A7), courtesy of APS Facilities staff.

⁵ "Superintendent's Annual Report 1953, Arlington Virginia, Classrooms for Arlington's Children." Record Group 7-1-2-5: Building Information, Arlington School Board Records, Virginia Room, Arlington County Public Library.

B. Architects

Charles Morrison Robinson, architect, and General Conservation Company, Harrisonburg, Virginia, general contractor, designed and constructed the original school building. Upman and Adams Architects, Washington, DC, and J.C. Curtis, general contractor, were responsible for the 1925 addition while Allen Joyner Dickey, AIA, was the architect for the 1957 addition and remodeling.

Charles Robinson (1867-1932)⁶ apprenticed with D.S. Hopkins in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and with John K. Peebles in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, before entering into practice with G.T. Smith in 1889. In 1906 Robinson moved to Richmond and embarked on a career designing educational facilities across the state.⁷ Robinson is credited with over four hundred public school buildings, including five in Alexandria (now Arlington) County. Only two are extant today, the Fort Myer Heights School designed in 1909 and the Clarendon School (now known as Maury) designed in 1910. The others were located in Cherrydale, Ballston, and Barcroft.

Frank Upman (1872-1948)⁸ received his architectural training at the Chicago School of Architecture and the Art Institute and relocated to Washington, DC, in 1897 to work in the local office of Chicago architect, Henry Ives Cobb. In 1904, Upman entered into a partnership with Clarence Harding. Upman later served in France and England with the Construction Division of the U.S. Army's air force, and then returned to Washington to resume his architectural career at the war's end.

Percy C. Adams (1869-1953)⁹ graduated from Cornell University in 1893.¹⁰ He began practicing architecture in Buffalo, New York, that same year. In 1897, Adams moved to Washington, DC, for a position in the Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury, and by 1909 was in practice with Frank Avenill. Adams is remembered for the design of the inauguration stands at the White House for President Wilson's second inauguration and for his collaboration on the design of more than thirty-five schools in Arlington County, Virginia, and Prince George's County, Maryland.¹¹

The architectural firm created by Upman and Adams practiced throughout the 1920s through the 1940s.¹² It is likely that the firm had a long-standing agreement with Arlington County, either on retainer as designers for the county's public school buildings or as consulting parties to the contracts for the work, as they are associated with most school projects during those decades, including

⁶ All biographical information on Charles Morrison Robinson is available online from www.charlesmrobinson.com/history.html and www.charlesmrobinson.com/public.html, except as noted. Websites accessed March 2008.

⁷ Frazier Associates, "Matthew Whaley School, Williamsburg, VA," Registration Form, March 2004, National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service. Available online at www.dhr.virginia.gov/registers.

⁸ William Bushong et al., "A Centennial History of the Washington Chapter, 1887-1987," American Institute of Architects, 170; "Frank Upman, Noted District Architect, Dies," *Washington Post*, December 10, 1948, B2. His address of record at the time of his death was 2049 North Glebe Road.

⁹ Listing for Percy C. Adams in "Who's Who in Architecture," *American Art Annual* (1924), 360; see also, "Percy C. Adams, 84, Schools Architect 58 Years, Dies," *Washington Star*, September 9, 1953.

¹⁰ Cornell Alumni News, 1 April 1915, available online at www.ecommons.library.cornell.edu.

¹¹ Traceries, Inc., "Chevy Chase Theater," Nomination, 1996, National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, section 8; also, Cornell Alumni News.

¹² "Chevy Chase Theater," sec. 8, 5. The nomination states that the partnership began in 1923 and ended with Upman's death in 1948; however, Adams's obituary claims that the partnership began in 1917 and continued until 1945.

Washington-Lee High School in 1925 and the rear addition to the Wilson School.¹³ In 1925, Upman and Adams created the Allied Architects of Washington with Nathan Wyeth and Gilbert Rodier so that they could compete for architectural projects sponsored by the government. Perhaps the best known of their design submissions is the Longworth House Office Building (1929).¹⁴

Allen J. Dickey (1914-93)¹⁵ was a practicing architect in the Washington metropolitan area for more than fifty years, and was involved in approximately nine hundred projects. Among his most notable projects was his work on the design of the Pentagon. Dickey also designed many of the area's schools, churches, banks, and shopping centers, including the Lee Shopping Center in Lyon Park (HABS No. VA-1425).

¹³ Sara Amy Leach, "Arlington's Lawyer's Row: The People and the Place of a Lost Courthouse Tradition," *The Arlington Historical Magazine*, 9, no. 4 (October 1992): 42.

¹⁴ "Chevy Chase Theater," sec. 8, 5-6.

¹⁵ Julia Taylor Thorson, "A Regional Architect and His Work: Allen J. Dickey, Arlington, Virginia," 1955; see also the finding aid for RG 92: Personal Papers of Allen J. Dickey in the Virginia Room and "Allen J. Dickey, Architect," *Washington Post*, April 14, 1993, C6.